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BERGSONIAN SCIENCE-FICTION: KODWO ESHUN, GILLES DELEUZE, & THINKING THE REALITY OF TIME

LEXICON, PHILOFICTION APOCALYPTIC, BERGSON, DELEUZE, KODWO ESHUN, SCIENCE FICTION, TIME

To be more precise, science fiction is neither forward-looking nor utopian. Rather, in William Gibson's phrase, science fiction is a means through which to preprogram the present [...] Science fiction operates through the power of falsification, the drive to rewrite reality, and the will to deny plausibility, while the scenario operates through the control and prediction of plausible alternative tomorrows.

A book of philosophy should be in part a very particular species of detective novel, in part a kind of science fiction...What this book should therefore have made apparent is the advent of a coherence which is no more our own, that of mankind, than that of God or the world. In this sense, it should have been an apocalyptic book (the third time in the series of times).

In this essay we will argue for the necessary connection between of Kodwo Eshun's and Gilles Deleuze's thoughts on the nature of Time due to each thinkers shared Bergsonian premises. The aim is to demonstrate that the primary illusion, which we must disabuse ourselves of in order to grasp the philosophical and political import of the reality and structure of Time, is the assumption that Afrofuturism (Eshun) and a 'philosophy of Difference' (Deleuze) remain preoccupied with the future as such. On this view, Deleuze and Eshun appear to privilege the future in their understanding of time due to their assumption that it is in this futural dimension of time where novelty and difference meaningfully determines the present; in other words, Deleuze and Eshun supposedly assert that it is when the Future affects the present that the true qualitative transformation of the present (categorized Difference-itself or 'novelty') is said to be realized in any meaningful sense. Against this understanding of things, we will begin by rehearsing some of the shared Bergsonian premises that inform Deleuze's and Eshun's thoughts on Time. Then, we will see how Bergson's influence operates in their own thinking as well as contrast their understanding of Time to the nature of time under capitalist social relations. Lastly, we'll conclude by showing how this specific understanding of time, in philosophy for Deleuze and in science-fiction for Eshun, is of an apocalyptic, or catastrophic, nature.

1. On Geometrical & Vital Time

For Bergson the problem that we face in understanding Life and the duration proper to it is the imposition of what he called the 'geometric' order onto the 'vital' order of Life (this language of a geometric order as opposed to a vital order is taken from *Creative Evolution* but is already found in his earliest text *Time and Free Will*). For Bergson, the intelligibility of Life-in-itself is never grasped, as Aristotle thought, through the definition of time as the measure of movement through space; a definition which posits the essence and actuality of time as dependent upon space for its own existence. For the Aristotelian, Time's existence and actuality is subject and determined by Space as such. Thus, if time is not ontologically dependent on space as Bergson maintains; if time is not reducible to the linear progression of the measure of movement; then this understanding of Time-itself requires a reconceptualization of the very lexicon of temporality: the past, present, and future.

This reworking of our temporal lexicon can be seen in Bergson's *Creative Evolution*, and specifically in the passages where he gives his refutation of interpreting Life in terms of finality/final causes. On the 'Finalist' or teleological account of the reality of Time, the future finds its reality in the past and present, follows a certain order, and is guaranteed due to first principles. Thus, for the finalists, the future remains fixed and dependent upon the linear progression of time. For Bergson, however, the future is precisely that which does not depend on the linear progression of time for its own reality.

From the 'vitalist' perspective (contra the finalists), Bergson writes, "we see...that which subsists of the direct movement in the inverted movement, *a reality which is making itself in a reality which is unmaking itself*." Just as Eshun's epigraph highlights how Afrofuturism was never concerned with the future as such but with the relation between the alternate futures the present world makes possible; just as Deleuze notes that the science fiction aspects of a 'good' book mirror his reading of Nietzsche's untimeliness as wresting from the present a future which does not repeat the violence of the past and present; Bergson should be seen here as giving this vital theorization of Time in its most 'pure' or theoretical manner. It is this theory of time as conceived by Bergson that will become the grounds for Deleuze's and Eshun's understanding of Time as it relates to the practice of philosophy and the genre of science-fiction/Afrofuturist aesthetics.

2. Deleuze and Eshun on the Future

When Deleuze articulates his Third Synthesis of Time; that 'static and ordinal' synthesis where time exists 'out of joint' and thus gives a new order/meaning to our very understanding of the world; what constitutes Time's 'out-of-jointness' is precisely a revaluation of the geometric modeling of time in order to propose the understanding of Time as the process that proceeds without any concern or care for the *future as such*. As we saw with Bergson, it is of the nature of Time to exist as without purpose, end, or final destination. If Time has no concern for the future and yet it is said to be constitutive of the reality of a really novel difference that is made in the world, what constitutes the creative novelty of time resides in Bergson's claim of 'a reality that is making itself in a reality that is unmaking itself'. In other words, the novelty that pertains to 'difference' is to be found in the reciprocal relationship between the past and the present. Thus, for Deleuze, the temporal development of life taken in its broadest sense does not care about the preservation of species or even the preservation of its own natural processes. Thus, time taken as it is constituted by Life itself, must be understood as continuously producing various possible futures that are left up to the contingency of the other evolutionary, biological, chemical, etc., processes of Life itself. We might say that Time understood in this vitalist manner means that Life is the continual superabundance of an excess that Life can *neither control nor wants to control*. It is the vitalist, as Deleuze underscored, who gives us access to life (Difference) in its free and untamed state. Similarly, Eshun's idea of the genre of science-fiction as one of capitalizing on the 'powers of falsification, the drive to rewrite reality, and the will to deny plausibility'; conceives of time as 'out-of-joint', as constituting a new ordering/meaning of the world, but one forged out of the coexistent pasts that remain subordinate to a particular ordering of the world at present. Just as it was with Bergson and Deleuze, Eshun will deny the futural dimension of time the potency of the past-present relation. As he writes,

it would be naïve to understand science fiction, located within the expanded field of the futures industry, as merely prediction into the far future, or as a utopian project for imagining alternative social realities. Science fiction might better be understood, in Samuel R. Delany's statement, as offering "a significant distortion of the present." To be more precise, science fiction is neither forward-looking nor utopian. Rather, in William Gibson's phrase, science fiction is a means through which to preprogram the present. Looking back at the genre, it becomes apparent that science fiction was never concerned with the future, but rather with engineering feedback between its preferred future and its becoming present.

The future of science-fiction as conceived by Eshun is precisely the opposite of Utopian and Messianic time (these latter two conceptions of a future-to-come locate the determining temporal factor in the future while Deleuze and Eshun, following Bergson, locate the element that determines and actualizes a future as the relationship between the past and the present). For Eshun, this view of time as the non-teleological procession of change and development becomes crucial for understanding what is specific to Afrofuturism as a whole. Not only is it the case that Afrofuturism "studies the appeals that black artists, musicians, critics, and writers have made to the future, in moments when any future was made difficult for them to imagine." Additionally, Afrofuturism reveals the aesthetics of science-fiction as capable of giving us real, historical, knowledge about the lives of Afrodiasporic subjects: "Afrodiasporic subjects live the estrangement that science-fiction writers envision. Black existence and science-fiction are one and the same." Black existence and science-fiction are one and the same for Eshun precisely because the Time that

defines their respective locations in history and society are conditioned by the geometric ordering of time that ensures the continuous marginalization of lost or forgotten (Afro)future in the name of the perpetuation of capital's present. Additionally, Eshun's refusal of the geometric model of time follows the likes of Toni Morrison; where Morrison argued that the geometric model of time simply guarantees a repetition without difference of the processes of racialization, colonization, and exploitation that originally marked African subjects:

In an interview with critic Paul Gilroy, Toni Morrison argued that the African subjects that experienced capture, theft, abduction, mutilation, and slavery were the first moderns. They underwent real conditions of existential homelessness, alienation, dislocation [sic], and dehumanization that philosophers like Nietzsche would later define as quintessentially modern. Instead of civilizing African subjects, the forced dislocation and commodification that constituted the Middle Passage meant that modernity was rendered forever suspect.

By now this much should be clear: Afrofuturism engages in a thoroughgoing criticism of the geometric view of time since it simply ensures the perpetuation the originary colonial violence that ensures capitalism's development.

3. A Society Without Time: The Time of Capital

In *What is Philosophy?* Deleuze and Guattari define philosophy as the creation of concepts; as an activity that requires the engendering of Thought in a subject, in order for that thinking-subject to fabricate a concept that is adequate to the Idea-Problem of their time. However, this tripartite criteria (Thinking; posing Problems; and creating Concepts) given by Deleuze for identifying and undertaking the praxis of philosophy was already formulated as early as his 1968 work *Difference and Repetition*:

The famous phrase of the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, 'mankind always sets itself only such tasks as it can solve', does not mean that the problems are only apparent or that they are already solved, but, on the contrary, that the economic conditions of a problem determine or give rise to the manner in which it finds a solution within the framework of the real relations of the society. Not that the observer can draw the least optimism from this, for these 'solutions' may involved stupidity or cruelty, the horror of war or 'the solution of the Jewish problem'. More precisely, the solution is always that which a society deserves or gives rise to as a consequence of the manner in which, given its real relations, it is able to pose the problems set within it and to it by the differential relations it incarnates.

What is significant regarding the equation 'philosophy = concept creation,' and the subsequent annihilation of any guarantee that the thinking-subject will be rewarded with optimism in their search for truth, is that these three elements that constitute the practice of Philosophy do not operate according to the linear/finalist conception of temporality. That is, the thinker cannot hope for any optimism insofar as they are thinking precisely because what is given in a thought that adequately poses problems and creates concepts are the multiple solutions, or futures, that are harbored within every problem posed and concept created. Thus, philosophy properly understood according to Deleuze stands against the linear conception of time, where the reality of the future is fixed and furnished by the internal and originary principles of the past. In a similar manner, Eshun's considerations regarding Afrofuturist art and practice isn't devised to give one a sense of optimism or pessimism regarding the ways in which capital perpetuates the worst aspects of human history on an ever increasing scale. Afrofuturism isn't simply one more science-fiction bedtime story for the radical imagination.

Rather Afrofuturism is a program for recovering the histories of counter-futures created in a century hostile to Afrodiasporic projection and as a space within which the critical work of manufacturing tools capable of intervention within the current political dispensation may be undertaken...As a tool kit developed for and by Afrodiasporic intellectuals, the imperative to code, adopt, adapt, translate, misread, rework, and revision these concepts...is likely to persist in the decades to come.

For Eshun the imperative of the vital as opposed to geometric ordering of Time is that *we must do violence to our habituated forms of cognition* in order to sinew the order of philosophical, aesthetic, and political practice to an actualized overcoming of the persisting relevance of Morrison's claim that the historical fate of African subjects, being the first true moderns, rendered modernity forever suspect. Thus it would appear that philosophy (Deleuze), aesthetics (Eshun), knowledge (Bergson) are united in their shared duty to intervene in a manner that does justice to the counter-futures that coexist within our present.

For the Deleuze, this violence done to habituated forms of cognition means freeing oneself from the bad habits of thought that we have been socialized into taking as synonymous with Thinking as such. To dissuade ourselves of the idea that the task of thought is representation and realize that the power and function of thought is in its ability to pose true as opposed to false problems. For Eshun, this violence we must undergo means freeing oneself from the ongoing effects of the determination and construction of a global future that continues to exclude ever growing swaths of humanity and their respective counter-futures. Thus, philosophical activity (Deleuze) and Afrofuturism (Eshun) aren't simply against their own socio-historical situatedness and thereby concerned with the future for its own sake. As we saw with Bergson in terms of "Life," and as we apprehend through Eshun, we are not concerned with the theorization and determination of time because time (Life, History) has a concern for-itself, for-us, and for its future. To the contrary: it is precisely because the past and the present, taken in themselves, have neither a concern for their own future nor the future of human existence that a thought and politics of the future is not one that is

infatuated and enamored with the blind and intensifying processes of our present.

It is instructive, here, to note a difference between time as conceived by Deleuze and Eshun and the specific temporal order imposed by capital. Time as determined by capital, and specifically in terms of finance capital, enacts its own 'synthesis' of past, present, and the future. What distinguishes the time of financial capital from time as conceived by Deleuze and Eshun is that in the former case, the synthesis of the past and present of capital with its future; the future here understood as resource for appropriation via debt and the determination of global societies future; is actualized in a manner such that global capital's future secures and perpetuates the power relations of its present. As Maurizio Lazzarato has noted regarding capital's own synthesis of time via finance:

No use making a fuss because the economy's "present" and "future" fail to match up! What matters is finance's goal of reducing what will be to what is, that is, reducing the future and its possibilities to current power relations. From this perspective, all financial innovations have but one sole purpose: possessing the future in advance by objectivizing it. In this way, debt appropriates not only the present labor time of wage-earners and of the population in general, it also preempts non-chronological time, each person's future as well as the future of society as a whole. The principal explanation for the strange sensation of living in a society without time, without possibility, without foreseeable rupture, is debt.

Rather than a synthesis of the past, present, and future that prises multiple futures from the mutual determination of the past and present, the synthesis of time offered by capital forecloses the possibility of many futures in the service of a single future time that resembles our present circumstance: living in a society without time. Capitalist society as one that produces this experience **of living outside of time** essentially means that our present and future are increasingly made to be identical with one another, thereby rendering the very lexicon of time (past, present, future) meaningless. The past, present, and future of Time have now become one and the same reality.

Catastrophe – The Time of Science-Fiction

As we have seen, Deleuze's and Eshun's theorization of Time affirms the mutual determination of the past and the present while avoiding a determination of the future that simply repeats the socio-political power relations of our present. Regarding their theoretico-political commitments, it is clear that neither novelty, nor difference, nor utopian salvation is taken to be synonymous with the futural dimension of time as such. Rather, it is through the participation and determination of the relationship between the past and the present that one wards off the continuous foreclosure of the future within our present. It is in this way that the Third Synthesis of Time acts as the science-fiction element of *Difference and Repetition*; the books 'apocalyptic' moment where the I and Self are both fractured and dissolved, respectively, in the static ordinance of Time. And this is precisely what Eshun means when he says that science-fiction was never really about the future in the first place. To merely be 'about the future'.. such an interpretation is only possible if we take the reality of time to be founded upon the reality of space, or time's determination by capital; a perspectival-position that revokes any philosophical and/or political potential for the existence of multiple futures within a single future-time from the current present of geopolitical life, clearly defined by its terrestrially instantiated death-drive.

In light of these reflections we can conclude with our own reassessment of Bergson's contrast between geometric and vital time. While instructive, it must be admitted that Bergson's schema of the two orders of time, is outstripped by the concerns of both Deleuze and Eshun. Instead of a geometric as opposed to vital time, we might say that what Deleuze and Eshun are constructing is a schema that poses capitalist time against a time characterized by capital's abolition; a time also proper to science-fiction which can be called *apocalyptic*, or even catastrophic. When Deleuze reflects on Samuel Butler's *Erewhon*, it is precisely this missed opportunity of developing an apocalyptic work of science-fiction that Deleuze takes as his cue in approaching philosophy itself: "A book of philosophy should be in part a very particular species of detective novel, in part a kind of science fiction. What this book should therefore have made apparent is the advent of a coherence which is no more our own, that of mankind, than that of God or the world. *In this sense, it should have been an apocalyptic book (the third time in the series of times)*" (*Difference and Repetition*, Preface). Likewise, with Eshun, the tools of Afrofuturism are geared toward constructing a future where counter-futures no longer need qualification as a counter-future in the first place. Thus we can say that Deleuze and Eshun's theorization of time can be formulated in a manner that seeks to bastardize Nick Land's claim that catastrophe is the future's coming into existence as seen from an all-too-human perspective. On the contrary, and for Deleuze and Eshun, catastrophe must be understood as the future's coming into existence seen from the vantage point of Capital.

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